

# Translation as a tool for learning English

**Autor:** Catalán Alcocer, Cristina (Licenciada en Economía, Técnica Superior de Idiomas del Gobierno de Navarra).

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## Abstract

This article deals with Translation as a useful tool and a good didactic procedure when learning and teaching English as a second language. It concentrates on translation of texts, the use of the first language in the classroom context and the motivation or lack of it that appears when using translation. It can be a great tool whenever it is used appropriately in a communicative context. It has to be carefully planned and its overuse should be avoided.

**Keywords:** Translation, English

**Título:** La Traducción como herramienta para la enseñanza del inglés.

## Resumen

Este artículo trata de la "Traducción" como una herramienta útil y un buen procedimiento didáctico cuando se trata de la enseñanza del inglés como segunda lengua o lengua extranjera. Se basa en la traducción de textos, el uso de la primera lengua en el contexto del aula y la motivación o falta de ella al usar la traducción como herramienta de aprendizaje. Puede ser útil siempre que se utilice apropiadamente en un contexto comunicativo. Tiene que ser cuidadosamente planeada y su uso excesivo debe ser evitado.

**Palabras clave:** Traducción, Inglés.

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## 1.- INTRODUCTION

Translation can be a useful tool and a good didactic procedure when learning and teaching English as a second language (L2) in the classroom whenever it is used correctly and in a reasonable, functional and coherent way, and it can even speed up the learning process if used appropriately in a communicative context. It has to be carefully planned and its overuse should be avoided.

According to *Duff* (1989) "translation develops three qualities essential to all language learning: accuracy, clarity and flexibility."

## 2.- TRANSLATION IN CLASS.

In the near past translation was considered to be an arduous and little motivating task that dealt with boring texts teachers used when teaching a second language (L2).

Direct translations appeared in exams and sometimes, especially in more advanced levels, reverse translation activities were also used.

Nowadays, teachers try to create more interesting translation activities, in a more communicative context, and the texts used are always different depending on several factors as the age of students, their L2 proficiency level, the number of students attending each specific class and also depending on different socio-cultural and educational factors.

The translation of texts allows generally a comparison between the first language (L1) and the target language (L2), to highlight the differences between both languages and cultures and to avoid literal translations and future mistakes. It also enables the comparison of words, false friends, phrases and expressions, collocations (as learning a word is learning what other words it is used with) and idiomatic turns of phrase.

Literal translation is not always possible and students should be aware that sometimes when translating, we lose "something" along the way. Translation has to do with chunks of information rather than with words and pointing out the

differences between L1 and L2 may help students to remember these chunks and also to be conscious of the fact that words and phrases are not used in isolation.

For a good text translation students should realize how crucial to have "sociocultural knowledge" or being "bicultural" is, which is even more significant than being bilingual.

Vocabulary acquisition is also very important in order to be fluent and accurate when translating: words and phrases are not used in isolation, they have collocations, they have context. The knowledge of a word implies not only to know its definition, but also how that word fits into the world.

For basic levels, translation of short phrases could be used to reinforce some learned structures, and also and especially for student to be aware that word-for-word equivalence does not exist. This world to world translation is used by some students, especially those who have never faced a language other than their L1 before, and those who are stuck in old language teaching methods.

### 3.- THE USE OF L1 IN CLASS.

Translation is not exclusively a classroom activity of converting a L1 text into another of the L2 target language (or vice versa). It is also about the translations that teachers and students do in class, for instance, how much the L1 is used in the classroom and with what purpose.

In recent years, the use of the L1 has been stigmatized. Total immersion in the classroom has been defended at all costs, and many times the role of the native speaker has been regarded as the unique possibility.

Nowadays, we begin to consider that the use of language L1 in the classroom does not have to be bad in itself, but rather the contrary, it may be desirable in certain situations. This is not about translating everything into the L1 language, but it is true that some expressions, idioms, deceptive words, collocations and even some difficult structures can be translated.

First of all, the teacher has to do a previous work, trying to explain the unknown word in the target language, rephrasing a sentence or giving the students an equivalent for the unknown word or expression. By doing so, we are enriching the students' vocabulary and also preparing them to make inferences and solve problems, trying to demonstrate meanings by providing clues and allowing students to build their own learning, moving from a teacher-based approach to a more learner-centered one. Sometimes teachers have to define words or phrases by making reference to the sociolinguistic meaning and also to the cultural, contextual and linguistic differences between the mother tongue and the target language, and they also have to talk about similarities between words.

We do not want to get into the habit of just telling them the Spanish equivalent of an expression, but when everything we have just mentioned is not useful and does not work to make students understand, it is better to directly perform the translation of certain concepts or otherwise would be almost a waste of time. We know that time is also important in achieving many of the goals of a learning program.

As *Newmark* (1991) states, "In the elementary stage, translation is useful as a brief time saver".

In some grammar explanations the use of L1 is necessary, since the mastering of L2 that students have perhaps is not enough to understand these concepts. And so, the L1 is useful to clarify whatever doubt students have. Some teachers also tend to use translation when they want their students to see how differently languages work, with punctuation, verb tenses, subject omission etc.

But if translation is used as a rule in the foreign language class, however, we will be reducing the amount of exposure of students to the language, something that is not desirable.

In very young learners, L1 is typically used in class to call the students' attention, either to get them to continue paying attention, either to highlight the importance of a topic, or to reinforce concepts and for the teacher to be sure that students have understood them.

However, it is still the day when teachers while teaching at levels that exceed from B1, try by all means to use L1 as little as possible.

Sometimes, the high students' linguistic level seems to be precisely the result of years without using the language in class. In this environment the use of monolingual dictionaries is also highly recommended.

But the L1 cannot be used in the classroom if it is not the same L1 for every student. In this situation, if the L2 level is not very high, teachers must use gestures, mime, explanations, repetitions of the same idea with different words, drawings etc. in order to make students understand the concept.

When students of high levels know that Spanish is not an option in the classroom (when the L1 is not the same for everybody) they may put more effort into speaking only in English, and probably more motivation may arise.

#### 4.- MOTIVATION

As *Stephen Krashen* and his "Input Hypothesis" claims, learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, and a low level of anxiety are better equipped for success in second language acquisition.

When related to texts translations, in the near past, we have considered translation activities to be boring, high-time consuming and producing a lack of motivation.

When related to teacher's translation in the classroom, if students get used to it every time they do not understand something, all the effort to use the L2 language is vain and the student could simply wait for the clarification and translation into their mother tongue of what he does not understand, decreasing their motivation to strive for the understanding without translating.

Adults tend to feel more anxious and sometimes they ask for more translation. The L1 can be used in this case with the students to strengthen self-confidence. It is very important that students do not feel the pressure of using L2 against their will. Every single person is different and learns at different pace and so teachers should be aware of that, preventing from insecurity and lack of motivation.

#### 5.- TRANSLATION ACTIVITIES

Translation can be occasionally introduced in the classroom and be integrated with the four other skills of speaking, writing, reading and listening. These activities have to be motivating and its aim should be that of promoting communicative competence and raise language awareness.

Translation can especially help productive skills to improve and it can be a support for the writing process, especially at lower levels. Learners seem to be able to have more access to information in their own language L1, which they can then translate into the second language, L2.

Related to the listening skills, another possible activity could be that of translating songs into Spanish. Students can work in pairs or groups dealing with differences and similarities of words and practicing pronunciation. It is also important to choose the song carefully, in order to be accurate to the level of the student and to serve to reinforce structures or vocabulary that has been seen in class.

Another possibility could be that of encouraging students to notice bad translation by making them correct their peers' productions. As *Allford* claims: "Much of the language correction will be carried out by the learners themselves within their groups. They should be quite receptive to corrections from their peers."

Translation can be fun if used in role-playing activities, or if teachers try to bring the students out of the classroom and show them the places where English can be used, for them to be in a much more real situation.

But this is not always possible. Once again, time constrictions or too many students attending classes may prevent teachers from doing so.

#### 6.- CONCLUSIONS

As a short conclusion we would say that translation may be a good tool to be used in the classroom in order to improve the learning process in a communicative approach, but activities should be carefully chosen to avoid failure in communication and to prevent from the lack of motivation.

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